

**The City as Archive in Tomás Eloy Martínez's *El cantor de tango***

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In Tomás Eloy Martínez's *El cantor de tango*, Bruno Cadogan, a graduate student at New York University, goes to Buenos Aires to write his dissertation on Borges's essays regarding the origin of tango. He plans to meet Julio Martel, a secluded singer of unique talent, whose repertoire only comprises old-fashioned songs. After spending five months, from September 2001 to January 2002, in Argentina's capital, he accomplishes nothing: he fails to meet Martel, he writes only a few lines of his dissertation, and does not win the love of the two persons who attract him, an ambiguous scam artist, "El Tucumano," and Alcira Villar, Martel's girlfriend. At the end of the novel, Bruno is back to square one, in New York, where he hears of a mythical singer in Buenos Aires, some Jaime Taurel, who only sings old time tangos.

Through his botched attempts to listen to Martel's tangos, Bruno gives El cantor de tango its peculiar structure as a repository of records. His pursuit of Martel is complicated by the fact that the singer plays on the streets rather than in clubs or theaters. Unable to grasp the rationale for Martel's apparently random shows in locales scattered throughout the city, Bruno is always a step behind the singer. Every time he misses a rendezvous, however, he diligently records the site of Martel's appearances. Only towards the end of the novel, his efforts to decipher the code of the singer's performances are rewarded when Alcira unveils the secret of Martel's exhibitions. Rather than choosing the locations for his shows by chance, the singer purposefully played in the places where the most horrible, and unpunished, crimes in the history of Buenos Aires had been committed (248). By diligently copying Alcira's accounts of these atrocities, Bruno transforms the novel into a dossier of the violence perpetrated in the Argentine capital. At the foundation of this dossier there lies the archive, as records stored in police departments, courts of law, and newspapers make the narrative of the dark side of Buenos Aires possible. Keeping the records that give the novel its documentary base, however, is simply the most elementary task that the archive carries out in the construction of the novel. A more important role is played by principles and methods elaborated in the archive, which function as the novel's cognitive tools for understanding and ordering reality. By establishing an epistemic relation between his work and the archive, Tomás Eloy Martínez inserts El cantor de tango into a tradition, that of the archival novel, that goes back to nineteenth-century realism and, in particular, Balzac.

In their operations, nineteenth-century archives and bureaucracies put to work the epistemic principle of "identification through localization," whereby one can know individuals, be they archival records or living persons, by relating them to the physical sites of their origins. This principle informs both the archive's theory and the modern state's practice of identifying its subjects by way of bureaucratic instruments. In the archive, "identification through localization" means the adoption of the "Principle of Provenance" as the key norm in the arrangement of records. Firstly devised in 1841 as "*Le Respect de fonds*" (Horsman 53) and definitely formulated in 1881 as *Provenienzprinzip*, the Principle of Provenance states that records originating in the same office must belong to one series in the archive and be stored side by side on the same shelf.<sup>1</sup> Its adoption marked a momentous shift in archival discourse; in the previous age, archivists followed a different norm, the Principle of Pertinence, which arranged records on the basis of their subject matter as if they were part of one larger Encyclopedia. By switching from Pertinence to Provenance, the modern archive tied the identification of a record to the physical location of its production. As records were stored in a way that reproduced the layout of the offices that had generated them, arranging an archive amounted to a form of mapping. This is exactly what occurs in *El cantor de tango*, as the novel draws a map of Buenos Aires that reproduces the geography of its unpunished crimes. As Eloy Martínez, relates the stories of these crimes to the physical locations where the latter occurred, he transform the

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<sup>1</sup> The *Provenienzprinzip* was first formulated in the Regulations of July 1, 1881 of the Privy State Archives in Berlin, which prescribed "respect for every original order, for every original designation" (Posner 37).

Principle of Provenance into the immanent norm for the composition of El cantor de tango.

The change from Pertinence to Provenance in archival theory occurred within the same epistemic coordinates that framed the modern nation state's project of creating bureaucratic identities for all its subjects. In the new context created by the French Revolution, creating permanent records of citizens' lives allowed modern administrations to update the nation state's identification practices. By abolishing feudal rights, corporations, as well as cities' and rural communities' privileges, the Revolution cut the links tying individuals to their own territories. In so doing, it created a nameless and dangerous, from the ruling elites' viewpoint, multitude. In the following decades, the Industrial Revolution and the ensuing migration towards metropolitan areas compounded the problem by amassing an anonymous crowd of wage workers in cities' suburbs. In order to provide this populace with individual names and faces, governments had to substitute bureaucratic identification for the territorial identity that had characterized the *Ancien Régime* society. The key agency in this endeavor became the *État civil* (the French term for the Register of Birth, Marriages, and Deaths), which stored permanent records of citizens' names, births, and residences: it created a nationwide archive that linked people's identities to the territories where they were born and/or lived.

Novelistic discourse immediately utilized the epistemic principle of identification through localization that informed nineteenth-century archives and bureaucracies: the realist novel systematically explains characters' personalities and actions by framing them within the context of their upbringing and living. Not incidentally, Balzac, the

epigone of literary realism, was one of the first writers to adopt the archive's epistemic principles for novelistic purposes. As he invariably introduces his stories with detailed descriptions of the physical environment where they take place, Balzac approaches the mapping of a territory as the first step towards understanding the personalities of the characters that inhabit it. Exactly as in the archive researchers can grasp the meaning of records only by relating them to the original contexts where they were generated, so Balzac situates his characters in the physical locations, be they homes or working places, where he can corner their identities. At the beginning of Le Père Goriot (1834), for instance, Balzac first delivers a detailed description of Madam Vauquer's boarding house and then situates all the novel's characters in their own private quarters. It is only after this preliminary operation that the novel can begin to narrate old Goriot's story. In other words, plot can start in earnest only when the author has finished laying down the novel's archival foundation. This Balzacian paradigm was so effective that it survived the demise of realism and became a literary topos on its own, as its use in twentieth-century novels such as Michel Butor's Passage de Milan (1954) and Georges Perec's La Vie mode d'emploi (1978) proves.

Novels such as Le Père Goriot and El cantor de tango, are archival because of the type of reading they inspire: their readers cannot apprehend an individual, be it an object, a character, a story, without also perceiving the arrangement that enables that very apprehension. This is exactly what occurs in the archive, where approaching a record also entails taking into consideration the series where it belongs as well as the pieces of hardware—files, tags, shelves—that

makes archival order possible. In El cantor de tango, the reader cannot separate the stories of the crime committed in Buenos Aires from either the locations where they occurred or the sequence of Martel's exhibitions that assemble them into a meaningful series. As reconstructing the map of Martel's performances is the key concern of El cantor de tango, "the itinerary of the unpunished crimes committed in the city of Buenos Aires" [el itinerario de los crímenes impunes que se habían cometido en la ciudad de Buenos Aires] becomes the novel chief organizing structure (248).<sup>2</sup> By privileging this itinerary as its immanent order, Eloy Martínez's novel adopts another crucial tenet of archival discourse in the Modern Age, notably the fact that the arrangement of records originates from within the records themselves. As papers generated by the same agency combine to create one series, it is up to their origin, which is an internal component of theirs, to inform the order of the archive. Once applied to fictional texts, this criterion displays a significant potential for a critique of anti-historical, and ultimately metaphysical approaches to the structuring of literary works. As Bruno Cadogan notices, the map of Martel's performances "was simpler than he imagined. It did not outline any alchemical figure, nor did it hide God's name or Kabbalistic digits" [era más simple de lo que imaginé. No dibujaba una figura alquímica ni ocultaba el nombre de Dios o repetía las cifras de la Cábala] (248). As an archive, El cantor de tango organizes its contents through instruments originating in the very events it recounts rather than in a preexisting and extra-historical literary canon. This anti-metaphysical approach to literary creation has raised the archive to the position of being a key partner of the novel throughout Modernity, the age in which transcendental justifications for both the natural order and the social organization no longer

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine.

obtain. This is even truer since 1970, in late Modernity, when the modern mistrust in metaphysical explanations of reality also affects the grand narratives—comprising those inspired by secular visions of the world—of humankind’s history.

Tomás Eloy Martínez’s fascination with the archive originates in his interests in Argentina’s history, especially in Peron’s era. All his historical fiction (La novela de Perón, Santa Evita, and El cantor de tango) relies on an exhaustive documentation collected in the archives of governments, courts of law, and news agencies. Meta-archival issues play a key role in this project: in particular, by narrating the author’s problems with the creation, interpretation, and storage of records, Santa Evita (1995) becomes Martínez’s first text to foreground archival matters as significant concerns of the narrative. In a crucial passage of this novel, the author takes on a problem that is also of the utmost relevance in El cantor de tango.<sup>3</sup> I am referring to his avowed struggle to narrate a monologue delivered by Juana Duarte, Evita Peron’s mother. As he acts as a writer/narrator in his own novel, Eloy Martínez recalls giving up the third person, objective narration in order to turn his notes of that speech into a story: “Without the mother’s voice, his pauses, his way of considering the story, words meant nothing. [...] I struggled to

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<sup>3</sup> Santa Evita and El cantor de tango also connect through the common pattern that their plots follow. In both the novels, the story ends in a situation that somehow repeats that of the beginning. In archival fiction, this blockage in the temporal flow represents the novelistic transposition of the conflict that opposes plot to the archive: while the former becomes a chain of discrete elements disposed along the temporal axis, the latter consists in a network of spatial relations that freezes the stream of time.

accept the fact that only when the mother's voice was in charge there would be a tale" [Sin la voz de la madre, sin sus pausas, sin su manera de mirar la historia, las palabras ya no significaban nada. [...] Tardé en aceptar que, sólo cuando la voz de la madre me doblegara, habría relato] (366). Thus, Eloy Martínez diligently transcribes the audio record of the woman's monologue on paper and then stores it in the novel. In order to allow the character's voice to speak without the filter of the impersonal narration, the novelist must become an archivist.

In El cantor de tango, Eloy Martínez solves the issue of how to preserve the uniqueness of characters' voices by creating "a relay of first person narrators," in which he repeatedly uses the technique applied to the recording of Juana Duarte's words.

The most dramatic example of this approach consists in the story of El Mocho Andrade, Julio Martel's only childhood friend. As a young man, El Mocho joins the Montoneros, the militant wing of the Peronist movement that the military annihilated during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. The story of his years in the clandestine organization is consigned to the novel by a chain of narrators: El Mocho himself, Martel, Alcira Villar, and Bruno Cadogan. The last three voices respect the letter of El Mocho's original account, in particular the subjective approach to history that originates in the first person narration. They all behave as witnesses whose duty is the preservation of the other's speech even at the cost of becoming simple spokespersons on his or her behalf. The last narrator in this chain, Bruno Cadogan, is the archivist. In order to insert a faithful account of El Mocho's talk in the novel, he must behave as a bureaucrat who stores a record in the novel's page, an operation he repeats several times in order to



incorporate the stories of the innocent victims celebrated by Martel in El cantor de tango. As he traces back the itinerary of the singer's shows, Bruno builds the archival backbone of the novel, a series of records that are homogeneous, as archival theory prescribes, inasmuch as they originate in the same location, the city of Buenos Aires.

By transforming oral testimonies into documents to be stored in permanent repositories, Eloy Martínez carries out a crucial operation in the assembling of the historical record. Paul Ricœur calls this process "*mise en archive*," a term that defines the creation of historical proofs through the gathering and arranging of records. Ricœur is interested in the epistemic value of archival practices in historiography; he views the archive as the institution that allows history to become a written discourse and abandon the uncertainty (the *ouï-dire*, the hearsay, as Ricœur writes) of the oral testimony (209-230). In this process, it appears crucial the fact that in switching from speech to written prose an utterance also changes its addressee: an oral speaker always talks to a well-identified interlocutor, be it a single listener or a crowd, while a written record addresses an unknown, potentially universal audience. At the end of this transformation, when oral testimony has become a document, it achieves a sense that transcends the intention of its original author. In El cantor de tango, El Mocho Andrade tells Martel the story of his involvement in the killing of General Aramburu simply because he wants to vent his story to his best friend [*desahogarse de su historia*]. Once copied into the novel's page at the end of the relay of first person narrators, however, this account becomes a historical

record available to readers who do connect to its original author through personal relationships: it does not address a friend but an anonymous public. More importantly, rather than simply conveying El Mocho's feelings of disarray and loneliness it also documents the practices of the Peronist clandestine movement in a crucial time in Argentina's history.

When a witness testifies about traumatic events, storing his or her oral testimony in the archive becomes instrumental in the very survival of historical memory. Giorgio Agamben has discussed the ethic value of both the delivery and the preservation of testimonies in the context of the Holocaust. He views a true witness as somebody who attempts "to listen to that to which no one has borne witness, to gather their secret word," thus speaking for those who cannot speak (Agamben 38). This approach to the transformation of testimonies into permanent records helps in situating El cantor de tango within a new ethical context. Among the several stories narrated in the novel, the abovementioned account of El Mocho Andrade's militancy in the Peronist clandestine movement assumes a crucial importance. Tellingly, Martel's last public appearance as a singer occurs near the house where El Mocho organized the kidnapping and the killing of General Aramburu, one of the most sensational operations carried out by the Montoneros. As Alcira tells Bruno Cadogan, Martel knew of El Mocho's destiny only when a former political prisoner informed him that his friend had disappeared from a detention camp during the dictatorship. Rather than being one of the many *desaparecidos* that lost their lives in their years, El Mocho is the very epitome of disappearing. In Alcira's words, "the name of Felipe Andrade Perez does not appear in any of the innumerable lists of *desaparecidos* that have circulated since then, nor is it included in the court records of

the trial to the military leaders, as though he had never existed" [El nombre de Felipe Andrade Pérez no figura en ninguna de las infinitas listas de desaparecidos que han circulado desde entonces, ni consta en las actas del juicio a los comandantes de la dictadura, como si nunca hubiera existido] (201). The story of El Mocho, which is transmitted by a chain of witnesses, Martel, Alcira, Bruno and of course Eloy Martínez, speaks for all the victims of the dictatorship who did not even have a chance of having their voices heard. In this sense, by preserving only testimonies left behind by powerless victims, the author of an archival novel becomes the ultimate witness. In El cantor de tango, the symbol for the powerless that the novel becomes Martel himself, a singer of unbelievable talent who never achieved success and could record only one song in his life. By rescuing the memory of his unique voice, the novel speaks on behalf of an oxymoron of sorts, the speechless singer. Although this operation may seem to pursue a strictly private goal, paying homage to a person that fascinated the narrator, the novel's main thrust remains political.

All the crimes whose records are stored in El cantor de tango went unpunished for political reasons. Even in the killing of Felicita Alcántara in 1899, a murder that had clear sexual motivations, the killer escaped justice because he was actually a Colonel in Buenos Aires Police. Likewise, in all the political crimes that Martel evokes through his tangos—the execution of hundreds of political prisoners in the late 1970s, the shooting of the member of the Parliament Ortega Peña, the bomb that killed eighty-six persons in 1994, and the massacre of thirty strikers in 1919—no perpetrator was ever brought

to justice. By becoming an archive of the police's and the legal courts' blunders, El cantor de tango brings to the fore the innate bias in favor of the rulers that characterizes the practice of the archive. It proves that something must have gone wrong in the functioning of the legal archive if no official repository can store proofs against those who perpetrate political violence on behalf on the powerful.

By embracing this critical stance vis-à-vis the archive, Tomás Eloy Martínez positions El cantor de tango squarely in the territory of postmodern fiction. Adopting archival procedure, while criticizing them at the same time, corresponds to that "use and abuse" approach to the epistemic instruments of modernity that is typical of postmodernism, as Linda Hutcheon has persuasively argued (4). Differently from what occurred in the realist novel à la Balzac, whose ends and means matched those of the *État civil*, the postmodern novel uses the archive's epistemology as a tool for submitting the archival institution to radical criticism. Novels such as El cantor de tango utilize archival principles only to show that the archive's long-lived proximity to power has fatally corrupted its practices. Eloy Martínez manages to both assemble an alternative archive of Argentina's history and show its readers what kind of approach to the past was adopted in state run repositories of records. He demonstrates how these archives could shape an image of history favorable to the ruling elites by hiding and manipulating vital information on the past. Throughout this process, the falsification and destruction of records became more important than their storage, even if this occurred at the cost of silencing the voices of helpless victims. As it narrates human history as a tale of suffering and crimes, the archival novel proves that it is during the actual practice

of the archive, when records are forged and destroyed, that the worst atrocities are committed.

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